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# The Missionary Wife

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## The Missionary Wife

YOU AND YOUR HUSBAND have come to feel that your place in God's purpose for His world is on one of the Church's "frontiers." You are trying to understand all you can of what entering this kind of Christian service will mean. "It is a high calling to which you are called," says St. Paul, to become followers of Christ, and of course all Christians—doctors, bakers, trainmen, and their wives—are called to be missionaries wherever they are. Furthermore, you are called missionary in a more technical sense as well. As part of the total Christian witness of the Church you will be devoting full time to its organized missionary task.

Far fields always seem greener, and there is a natural human expectation that life in the "frontier" situation, whether it be across the tracks or across the world, will somehow all be exhilaratingly *significant*! But Christians have always found that fundamentally life is not different in one place or another, in one vocation or another. It would be unrealistic to forget that there is always the same human strain and stress, the same mixture of much that is ordinary routine with only occasional moments of high excitement. The Christian also knows that this *ordinary* day-to-day existence is as much in need of redemption as the critical historical moments of decision. As a Christian wife and mother it is probable that you will continue to find your service largely in the constant rediscovery of a way of *ordinary* living that points beyond itself, beyond the earthen vessel of the relations between a Christian man and wife and their children, beyond the home, the church, the community to God, the Creator and Redeemer of this same life.

Is this vocational choice to become missionaries *yours* as well as your husband's? Perhaps you aren't really sure yet. Perhaps you hope that willingness to try will grow into conviction of purpose. In our culture, vocational choice for a woman is a complex matter. Our society is in transition and expects a woman to

be many things, some of which are confusing and contradictory. On the one hand a girl on a date is expected to be pretty, amusing and somewhat feather-brained in contrast to her masculine escort. Yet at the same time the democratic ideal of equality has led us in many areas of our life to think of men and women in equalitarian terms—equality before the law, equality of opportunity in economic life and politics, etc.—rather than from the Biblical perspective of their dependence upon each other and the different and complementary nature of their contribution to society. Thus modern American women are expected in following a career to be independent and hold their own in a competitive society. But marriage carries with it somehow the mark of “success” in our society and the unmarried woman is regarded as having missed out, having in some sense failed. In marriage a still different set of womanly qualities is expected as over against those necessary and valued in dating or in a career.<sup>1</sup>

A man usually plans from the beginning what field he wants to enter, on a lifetime basis. A woman’s vocational choice of a career tends to remain tentative and temporary, ready to adapt to the possibility of marriage. The man’s career then generally takes precedence over the wife’s. The wife adapts to the place where her husband’s job takes him and the society into which it puts him. This is the general social context in which you and your husband have decided to be missionaries. The American pattern would be for your husband to make the basic decision and for you, if you had no real objection, to be willing to go along. But it is important that this be your decision, too, both because you also are going to be very directly involved in the work, the joys, and the hardships of this vocation, and because the Biblical understanding of the nature of man and woman makes clear that true creativity comes when the relationship between husband and wife, and the decisions that come out of this relationship, are such that the integrity of each as whole persons under God is guarded.

You and your husband may or may not have thought and talked together about what it means as a Christian to be a woman or a man, and further, to be a wife or a husband, a mother or a father. Because these things concern us at the fundamental level of who we are and what we are seeking in life, they are not easy to talk about, but because they involve relationships they need to be thought out and acted upon together. Very few Christian couples (and it is a cause of sorrow to them) find that they are able to meet each other very often at these basic levels. This need

not be a cause for discouraged acceptance of the situation or despair. The Christian is not one who has arrived in this (or any) area. God in Christ is reconciling the world to himself—including us—and the first movement of his love is to show us our inadequacy and need. The Christian missionary, like every Christian, knows himself to be one with all humanity, in need of God's forgiving love, and he seeks to bring to all his living an attitude of repentance and an expectation of renewal. If you as a missionary wife along with your husband can bring this attitude into your relationship with each other and with your children, to your work in Church and community, then the silence and the loneliness, the antagonisms and the hostilities which often separate the members of families and communities, will be seen to be a place where God is at work. This is true witness. The inward struggle with loneliness, hostility, etc., *and the witness* occur together in concrete situations such as those discussed below; in the adjustment to a strange culture, in the education of the children, in making a home, in serving others, and so on.

### WHAT WILL I BE DOING?

As one of a comparatively small group of missionaries in a situation where the possibilities of creative service far outnumber those on hand to undertake them, you will be called upon to use all of your training and skills. In Western countries today many women manage to combine a sizable load of community or church work, or a career, with meaningful family life. Many missionary wives have made outstanding contributions to the missionary efforts of the Church. You also will have the opportunity for this. Your responsibilities to your home will be recognized. In addition it will probably be possible to give as much time to professional or community service as seems wise in relation to the needs of your family. It would be well to discuss with your particular board what is expected of you, and what you think you could contribute in work outside the home.

Since you are a wife and probably are, or expect to be, a mother, your primary responsibility as Mrs. Missionary will be your home. As you need your husband's supporting love and understanding in a situation that can be very lonely and difficult at times, so also he needs yours. Together you can help your home to become a haven of peace, a place of refreshment and joy, where guests of high rank or low may enter and know they will find warmth and welcome. As children are born into the home they will need, as all children do, to find in their home

the love and security and courage with which to meet life—a rather complicated life, for they will grow up in two cultures at once. Being a missionary wife and mother can be a full time job and when the children are young this may well be the wise and necessary use of your time. But this decision may not be easy. You will encounter many sorts of pressures that may give you a destructive sense of guilt (in the face, for instance, of great needs on every hand) unless you have thought this whole question through carefully and are sure of your position.

Whether your work is largely at home or out in the community, one of the hard things is to learn to “do” nothing, to make yourself available to others, to be really and wholly present and receptive to whomever it is that needs you. It is hard for Western Christians who come from a culture where activity is so over-valued to regard as valuable *work* the simple act of being wholly present for another. Yet it is often out of just such *work* that deep understanding and trust are established and further significant work is thus made possible. You may already have felt some concern about the inordinate number of activities with which many churches and religious organizations keep themselves busy and the comparatively few times in the maze of activity that you have experienced real spiritual penetration and depth. In the different cultural situation in which you will now find yourself such busy-ness may not be valued. You and your husband may find that you will put less emphasis on efficiency and accomplishing things than you would in most places in North America. You will find yourselves taking more time with people just being yourselves, at their service.

## WHAT PREPARATION SHOULD I HAVE?

In the first place it should be as good or better than that required for a similar secular job in the United States or Canada. If you are to be working in one of the countries of Asia or Africa, for example, you may be training future national leaders. Mediocrity in preparation for either you or your husband is not good enough. Only the best will do. Many mission boards expect their candidate wives to be college graduates. A liberal arts degree that has included work in history, literature, language, Bible and church history, and science is a good general preparation for whatever you may find yourself doing. In choosing courses it might be well to keep in mind that you may be teaching your own and other children if no elementary school is available. In any case you will want to know all you can about

child development. If through your college courses you come to a critical understanding—both positive and negative—of your own cultural heritage, this will be a great help to you as you try to understand and adjust to cultural patterns and values that differ from yours. If you go on for further specialized training, it would be well to be in touch with your mission board to find out what is recommended in your field.

Whatever your formal training may be, it would be well to acquire as much skill as you can in the many tasks of home management and homemaking—remembering of course that you will doubtless have to adapt methods and techniques. Ease, simplicity, and adaptability in running a household are as valuable in a Christian home in the “frontier” situation as anywhere else. Important also would be training in first aid and up to date medical information regarding common childhood diseases and other illnesses.

Once you know where you are to be located you will be eager to begin to do as much reading as you can on the social and political history of the area and people, their literature, religions, art forms, etc. If you are to work among a people who speak another language, you may be able to get a good start at language study before you go. Some boards cooperate in providing a brief training period in area studies and language for outgoing missionaries. This can only be a beginning, of course, and needs to be carried forward patiently and persistently. The full understanding of another people requires years of daily study and experience. A good speaking and reading knowledge of the language is *absolutely essential*. You probably will not be able to do as much study as your husband because of responsibilities in your home. Don't get discouraged and give up! It is important for you also to make your contribution and to find satisfying relationships with the people whom you and your husband have come to serve. In order to break through your isolation as a foreigner (either by economic class or by nationality, or by both) some understanding of their culture and a growing facility with the language are real necessities.

Formal training is not everything. More significant in some ways is an attitude of mind and spirit. Sensitivity to others, curiosity about the unknown, eagerness to move into what is different—even alien—and to understand the life and people around one—these can lead to a kind of wisdom and a quick perceptivity that are of immense value, too, in overcoming barriers of language and class and culture.

## WHAT WILL IT BE LIKE?

Your missionary service may be rendered primarily through personal relationships—in the family, in teaching, in community work—but you go forth in a time when vast revolutionary forces are breaking through age-old social and economic repressions and injustices. In the midst of this tumultuous upsurge itself God is at work, and the question for Christians is *how* and *where*. You participate in this revolutionary situation whether you want to or not, positively or negatively. It is as urgent for you as it is for your husband to discover how this participation shall be indeed “under God”. One area for instance in which you may become most directly involved is the radical change in the status of women and of the family that is occurring in many places. What does the Christian faith (not middle class America) have to say here? There are good books<sup>2</sup> that have been written recently on Christian responsibility in the present world struggle and continuing discussion within the indigenous Christian community will help you to understand the practical implications for you of God’s redemptive work in your particular place in these revolutionary times.

You and your husband go as ambassadors for Christ. To be an ambassador means also to be in some sense an exile. This is true for those whose work keeps them in North America, but it is particularly true for those who go abroad. If you go abroad you will go out from the national and cultural community which has always been your home. You will find yourself without all the intellectual and spiritual sources of strength, inspiration and stimulation which have been sustaining and undergirding you more than you realize—close and understanding friends you have known from childhood, a family that believes in you, the joy of family reunions, a regular church service in a language you understand in a beautiful church with lovely music, the fellowship of Christian friends who share your faith and have the same cultural background, the special services, the concerts, lectures, radio features, religious retreats, and good newspapers. For courage and resourcefulness to meet the problems, the disappointments and exasperations of daily living (to say nothing of the tremendous opportunities and challenges of life that will face you on every hand), as a missionary wife you may find at first that you have only your own communion with God, the love and understanding of your husband, and your own common sense and good humor

on which to fall back. Later you will find other resources for spiritual strength and intellectual stimulation.

You will find yourself also without many of the material conveniences on which you now depend to lighten household tasks and reduce the time spent on them—a car, a supermarket, a department store, a vacuum cleaner, a washing machine, a telephone, a drug store. On the other hand, the different way life is organized, the different expectations, the different tempo, may mean that there is more chance for meaningful, happy family life than most hard working wives in middle class America can realistically hope for.

You will be leaving your own national and cultural community. You will be entering a new one. A sound understanding of your own heritage and an open appreciative approach to the ways and outlook in the new culture should help you to adapt yourself with sympathy and sensitivity. You may find yourself faced with different ways of doing almost everything and different attitudes from yours regarding things like time, appointments, efficiency, even truth perhaps. You will tend to generalize and sum up the culture in which you are a stranger on the basis of rather limited personal experiences. You will tend to be regarded as a stereotype of American married women. Encounter and exchange between persons of different cultures can occur in a way that breaks down the easy generalization and the facile stereotype. You will make a good beginning at this as you show your interest not so much in the oddity of custom and the quaintness of costume, but in the person as a human being with joys and sorrows and longings as deep as your own. If in the country to which you go there are a number of racial groups (such as in Burma or South Africa) it is important for you to make real friends among all the groups, not to align your loyalties with any one group exclusively. You will want to remain able to act as a bridge or a channel of reconciliation in times of tension or conflict between the groups.

Fruitful as cultural interchange may be, however, you go—and this is important—not as ambassadors of the West, but as ambassadors of Christ and these are not to be confused. You are not setting out to establish a little upper middle class America and put on a demonstration of what such a home is like. You will be trying to discover a new way of living, a manner of life whose rooting and grounding in a foundation of Christian integrity determine its openness and hospitality to aspects of the cultures of both Asia or Africa and the West.

One of the truly difficult problems in this whole area is that of your standard of living. What does it mean to identify yourself with the people to whom you come as servants in Christ! Although you and your husband may be passing up opportunities for higher salaries by working in the "frontier" situation, your missionary salary may still put you into the upper economic bracket in that situation. You may find your salary to be considerably higher than that of colleagues in the indigenous Christian group who are doing the same work. The schooling that you feel you have to provide for your children may seem fabulously costly to those around you. What seem to you to be household necessities may seem to be luxuries. A very high standard of living by comparison to that around you can be a real barrier for those who have little. If you are abroad, the fact that you have much while most of those around you, including your fellow Christians, have little may become a focus for their resentment and fear of the rich and powerful countries of the West.

In Western Christianity the use of one's own money has not been adequately brought under the scrutiny and discipline of the Christian community and remains a very individualistic matter depending greatly on family background. Something you may eliminate with ease may be an immensely difficult thing for another family to give up. As you make your decisions sensitively and conscientiously regarding your standard of living, you will realize in all humility that the decisions you have made will not be the ones for another family.

It should be pointed out of course that identification is not a matter simply of having or not having material things. The attitude taken toward material things is very important. If they are regarded essentially as a means of service, then an openness to all, including those in the very humblest circumstances will help to minimize the gap in the standards of living. Furthermore, there are some material things in life that peoples of all lands appreciate and feel are at the disposal of all; such things as art, music, literature. But rugs, for instance, in many places may be completely out of place. Again sensitivity to the situation is the key. And the ability to use a minimum of resources and create a home that is inviting, colorful and in simple good taste will be a great asset to you.

The whole question of standards of living is a very complex one and will demand of you courageous and imaginative experimentation. Discussion of the problem with friends—both mission-

aries and nationals—in the Christian community of which you become a part will be of help to you. There is no easy and no single solution to the problem. You will need to discover how your family can live and work most effectively as a part of the Christian community to which you have come, and accept in Christian love the varied personal decisions of other missionaries as they have met and are meeting this problem in their lives.

Have you had any actual experience of very simple living of a group or cooperative nature? Summer workcamps, caravans, summer service projects, students in industry seminars, etc., where simple group living is fundamental, would provide a valuable learning experience and a chance for a realistic understanding of your own capacities and tendencies in this area. Many boards recommend that you participate in some such project before going to your permanent work.

### WHAT ABOUT OUR CHILDREN?

The many-sided responsibility of bringing up your children is always a major challenge, and it is doubly so in a situation where you and your family participate in two cultures, sometimes more. A child whose parents have given him, through their love, affection, and faith, a trust in God and his universe, and the courage to face himself and life squarely—such a child is able to deal fairly well with the complications of growing up in two cultures and the adjustment later of returning to his parents' culture. Thus, as for all parents, it is important that you truly give yourself to your children. You need to give them an unhurried interest and a care and affection that will assure them of your abiding love and that they are of first importance to you, not secondary to "missionary" responsibilities. Of course it is the quality rather than the quantity of time that you give your children that will give them this reassurance. Along with family love and affection a child needs some sort of "house" to shelter his growing spirit, for the unlimited is a fearsome thing even for an adult. A child needs a structure of defined truth and value where areas of freedom and obligation and limitation are clear.

Because you will be living in the midst of a foreign culture, the importance to your children of family life will be heightened. It will be the main means of their entering into their own historic heritage. They will gain this through family worship, the reading together of great children's literature, through democratic family discussion, through music performed and appre-

ciated together, through hobbies, games, etc. You and your children will also participate in the life around you and gain much. Again the home will be the place where the children will absorb from you what should be their attitude toward the different values and habits which they meet every day and the people who express these. The experience of travel and of living in a different country and speaking another language can be an enriching and broadening experience for a child, and whether or not it will be so for your children will depend largely on the extent to which you find it so for yourself.

Most missionary parents expect their children to return to their own educational and cultural group in their home country. Thus schooling immediately presents a problem. In order to enter schools in North America during furlough years and to prepare adequately to enter Western universities, the schooling of missionaries' children has to be different usually from that of children of the people among whom the missionary work is being carried on. This will be true whether you are to live in a backward mountain area of the United States or in one of the ancient high cultures of the Orient. Your own local situation will present its own possibilities and necessities. If you live in a place where there is a fairly adequate grade school (mission, church, state or private) you may want to send your children there, supplementing their school work with special reading at home to help them enter the regular North American school systems without too much disruption and loss of time in furlough years. You may find yourself in a situation where the best alternative is to teach your own children entirely, at least in the early grade school years. There are excellent home school courses available. Sometimes a group of mothers using one of these systems can work out a cooperative school to meet their children's needs. It is important if you are going to teach your own children to try to include some other children, both nationals and Westerners, so that the school experience may help the children to learn to work and play with others.

We roughly estimate that about 75-95 percent of missionaries' children receive their lower elementary education in local schools or in the home; about 50-75 percent continue their upper elementary education in special boarding schools and about 75 percent attend high school in these boarding schools. Almost all return to their home country for college. The boarding schools are usually cooperative projects of North American mission boards. There are not a great number of these schools and your

children may have to travel some distance to attend the nearest one. Probably one of the hardest things that missionary parents face is the long months of separation from their children while they are away at school. Regardless of how good a school may be, if your home is a happy and secure one, there is no doubt that home is the best place for your children. Yet there is also no doubt that they need the good schooling with a group of their contemporaries that such a school can provide. It is of some comfort to know that children who have gained security in the early years at home in general are able to deal positively with the ups and downs of being away at boarding school—perhaps even more so than you.

### WHAT ABOUT OUR HOME?

You may have more assumptions than you realize about what a home should be like. And you may find that you have to sift them in the light of the demands of the Christian faith and the needs of your family and those you have come to serve. You will need to learn for instance to make a home while you are “sojourners and pilgrims.” You may be shifted from one mission station to another, from one mission house to another. You may find yourself living in the same household with another missionary family, perhaps from another denomination or of another nationality. A good deal of missionary work necessitates bringing persons or groups into the home, often with little forewarning, for meals, meetings, or for overnight stays. These may be people who interest and enrich you, or they may not. In all of this you will be a key person, and your way will be more joyous and less constrained if you can come to realize that your home belongs not to you, but to God for the accomplishment of his purposes.

You may find in the locality where you are to serve that it is usual for missionaries to have household help, thus freeing the missionary wife from certain tasks and enabling her to take on others. Your relationship to the servants in your household can be a real challenge. Here is a whole field for Christian witness and its importance is underlined by the fact that in many places the children and grandchildren of people who have served in missionary homes are strong members of the growing Christian community. The fact of widespread sensitivity, if not tension, in the world regarding racial discrimination and the fact that the missionary and servant are often of different racial groups adds another dimension to their relationship and heightens the importance of Christian witness in this realm.

If you do have a servant or two it may help you a great deal in your personal relationships with them if you can learn to give clear and definite directions to them. If you do not know what you want your household help to do and if you do not know how you want your house to be run, your servants will be confused. You should decide what your policies and program are—even if it means staying up a little later to make out a plan—and then be consistent about it. On the other hand you must be flexible too and willing to learn and adapt yourself to the customs and thought patterns both of those who work in your kitchen and those who take tea in your parlor. All of this will be new and difficult for you, but you will learn quickly. Having servants in your home can be a great help to you also in learning the language. If you will faithfully try to make your servant an additional language instructor, it will please him (or her), improve your relationship with him in the daily routine, and also help your language to become idiomatic.

#### WHAT ABOUT HEALTH?

In almost any of the Church's "frontier" situations health hazards are greater than in the normal North American community. You may not be as close to expert medical aid as you would wish and particularly if you go abroad you and your family will inevitably be exposed to diseases with which you have no experience and little natural immunity. The widespread lack of education in many areas of the world regarding the cause of disease and the resulting unawareness of the importance of sanitation for public health, make the preventive precautions of the individual family just that much more difficult and essential. In many areas all drinking water has to be boiled, all fruit disinfected, and no vegetables eaten raw if they are bought in the market. The use of a refrigerator has often helped cut down the incidence of dysentery in a family. Careful screening and the use of mosquito nets help combat diseases which are carried by mosquitoes or flies. There are now vaccines which immunize a person against many of the diseases which were most dreaded a generation ago (such as typhoid, small pox, cholera, etc.) and more are being produced by medical research all the time. These along with the availability of speedy means of communication and travel all help to make the health problems you will face far less serious than they used to be. Strong healthy bodies, a balanced attitude toward health problems, and accurate information about the diseases you are likely to encounter and their

treatment, will enable you to avoid illness where possible and, when you must deal with it, to do so wisely.<sup>3</sup>

## RECREATION

All work and no play can make a person go stale in missionary work just as in any other work. Recreation, which can take many forms, is essential to general well-being and effectiveness at work. As a missionary wife and mother you will be in a position to plan and provide—even insist upon—some of this recreation. You will have a chance to make full use of your imagination, talents, and skills. A list of the kinds of things you might do could go on and on. Here are a few: family outings to places of historic interest or scenic beauty; family evenings of music or outloud reading; family vacation treks or camping expeditions; children's picnics, circuses, etc.; adult evenings of play reading, community singing, or music appreciation through recordings, or concerts with members of the group contributing; times just for sociability and good talk; times for tennis or a ball game. Individually you might find real satisfaction in writing, painting, reading or composing.

In some of the things that you do as recreation you will probably want to include friends from the various groups in which you live and work. A different aspect of relationships is established through laughing and playing together than that which develops through work, and recreation together of the Christian working team can help to relax tensions and lend perspective.

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"It is a high calling to which you are called"—in the midst of a world that seems to be threatening to tear itself apart, and in the midst of a Church that by God's grace is being pulled together all over the world. And what is your work, your witness? That is just what we have been discussing all the way through. God in Christ reconciling men to Himself through the ordinary events and encounters of your day by day existence! You and your husband do not have an easy calling and you do not go forth in an easy time. But you do not go alone. God sends you out among a cloud of witnesses, the great Church across the world and down the centuries. He sends you from one struggling part of this great fellowship to another. God's grace undergirds and sustains you, chastens and renews you. The Holy Spirit is already at work ahead of you and in you. And Christ has promised, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

## NOTES

1. Helpful in this area is *The Many Lives of Modern Woman*, by Sidonie M. Gruenberg and Hilda Krech.
2. A few of these are: *Encounter with Revolution*, by M. Richard Shaull; *Revolution and Redemption*, by M. M. Thomas and Paul E. Converse; *Shock and Renewal*, by Keith R. Bridston; *The Christian and the World Struggle*, by M. M. Thomas and Davis McCaughey; and *This Revolutionary Faith*, by Floyd Shacklock.
3. See *How to Be Healthy in Hot Climates*, by Eleanor T. Calverly, M.D. *Living as Comrades*, by Daniel Johnson Fleming is helpful regarding problems of adjustment.

Two good books dealing with problems of family life in a Christian context are: *How Christian Parents Face Family Problems*, by John Charles Wynn, and *Your Home Can Be Christian*, by David Maynard More.

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